



Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

Scenes from a Marriage by Ingmar Bergman

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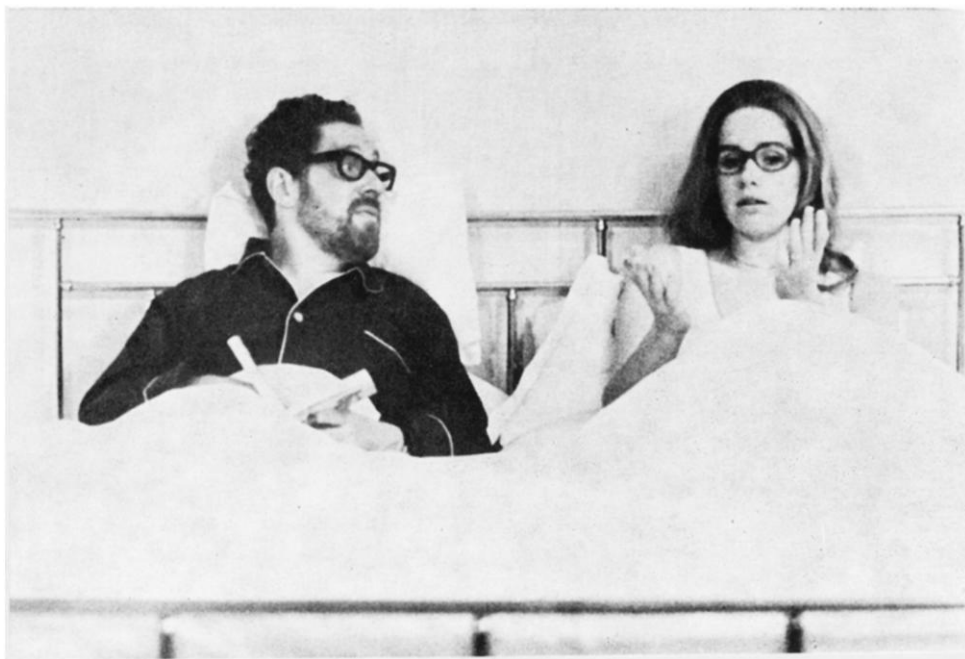
Reviews

SCENES FROM A MARRIAGE

Written and directed by Ingmar Bergman. Photography: Sven Nykvist. Cinema V.

Scenes from a Marriage is emotional dynamite. That may not be surprising for an Ingmar Bergman movie, but in some important ways this film moves in a new direction. It reaches new depths of psychological realism, and at the same time is actually hopeful. Normally when I see a Bergman film, I am exhilarated by his artistic brilliance and overwhelmed by his insights into human suffering, but I leave the theater feeling emotionally drained and depressed—especially after films like *The Silence*, *Shame*, *Hour of the Wolf*, and *Cries and Whispers*. I may feel less isolated in my pain, but there are few signs of relief; all humans seem doomed to experience unrelieved suffering. But *Scenes from a Marriage* made me feel more hopeful about the human condition—more willing to accept the contradictions in the desires and actions of myself and others, and more willing to believe in the possibilities of growth and change, particularly for women.

The film presents Marianne (Liv Ullmann) and John (Erland Josephson), a middle-class married couple, in six scenes spanning a ten-year period. In the first scene, called "Innocence and Panic," they are interviewed for a woman's magazine as the perfect couple. They live in a comfortable home with two lovely daughters and both have interesting careers; he is a psychology professor and she a divorce lawyer. Yet he seems arrogant and vain while she is self-effacing and unconfident—a reflection of traditional sex roles. Nevertheless, they get along harmoniously, particularly in contrast to their friends Peter (Jan Mahnsjo) and Katarina (Bibi Andersson), who have an ugly quarrel and are on the verge of a messy divorce. In the second scene, entitled "The Art of Sweeping under the Rug," Marianne and Johan begin to be aware of the dangers inherent in their conventionality. She tries to rebel against her mother's control over their lives and is frightened by a middle-aged client who rejects a safe, loveless marriage like her own. Johan is told by an old friend and colleague (Gunnel Lindblom) that his poetry is disappointingly mediocre, and we suspect that he may be having an affair. Hesitantly, Marianne and Johan begin to admit that they have sexual problems but don't do anything about



"Open-ended, slow-paced, and multi-climaxed":
SCENES FROM
A MARRIAGE.

solving them. In the third scene ("Paula"), Johan tells Marianne that he has fallen in love with another woman and intends to leave. Shocked and humiliated, Marianne begs him to stay. Although he feels guilty, he leaves anyway. Scene four ("The Vale of Tears") takes place a year later when Johan comes to visit Marianne and spends the night. Things have begun to go wrong for Johan, particularly in his relationship with Paula. Although Marianne is beginning to grow and to have new lovers, she is still in love with Johan and wants things to be as they were. Scene five ("The Illiterates") is the most explosive and the most contradictory. They meet in Johan's office to sign the divorce papers. The fact that Marianne no longer loves Johan enables her to seduce him and to be more sexually aggressive than she has ever been. Immediately after making love, they vent their anger and rage. Johan tells her how much he loathed her while they were married and then confesses that he really didn't want the divorce. They have a violent bloody brawl, and then quietly sign the papers. The final scene, which takes place years later, is called "In the Middle of the Night in a Dark House Somewhere in the World." Both are remarried to other persons, but they spend a weekend together in a friend's cottage. In contrast to the first scene, Johan has shrunk and become more humble while Marianne has expanded and discovered her strength. Yet they are both independent human beings who have grown tremendously. They speak honestly and despite all fears, doubts, and confusion, they find they love each other.

The themes and situations are not new for Bergman. We find the same courageous exploration of what lies behind the conventional masks and social personae, the same intensity of psychological encounters, the sudden outbursts of violence and rage, the same range of volatile emotions and shifting power dynamics that we have seen in films like *The Ritual*, *Persona*, and *Cries and Whispers*. Bergman's work has always, of course, had an extraordinary degree of psychological realism, but between *The Silence* and *Cries and Whispers* it has been expressed in

a highly symbolic framework. In these films ordinary reality subtly merges into dream and fantasy, characters function as fragments of a single personality, editing style and visual imagery call attention to the film-making process, breaking the dramatic illusion. These characteristics are not present in *Scenes from a Marriage*. Rather, the mode is an expanded psychological realism, which consistently strives for and achieves an extraordinary verisimilitude. The acting performances of Ullmann and Josephson are so convincing, the dialogue so realistic, the conception of the relationship so subtle, that it is difficult to believe we are watching a theatrical illusion.

The action is confined almost entirely to simple indoor settings—comfortable living and dining rooms, modern bedrooms and bathrooms, sunny breakfast rooms and hallways, sparsely furnished offices and labs, small cottages. Unlike the interior locations in *The Ritual* and *Cries and Whispers*, these environments are ordinary and realistic rather than theatrical or symbolic. Yet the rooms inhabited by Marianne and Johan express a great deal about their marriage. Despite the warmth of the earth colors and wood panelling that gloss its surface, their house is dominated by a routine symmetry in the arrangement of chairs, couches, lamps, tables, and flower pots, which is very restrictive. In the first scene when they are entertaining their friends for dinner, Marianne remarks: "Both Johan and I like to tidy up." It is precisely this overly patterned life which Johan attacks when he runs off with Paula. In the final scene, when Marianne and Johan come together after they have learned to accept the confusion in their lives, they reject their own former country house, which is still dominated by the old doublet patterns, and go instead to a friend's cottage, which is terribly cluttered. In the act of sorting out the confusion and "tidying up" together, Marianne is strongly moved by Johan and discovers how much she loves him. Throughout the film there are very few exterior scenes, which helps to make their relationship seem more "hermetically sealed." The few street scenes that do

occur retain the sense of isolation by showing no people other than Johan and Marianne. Yet, whenever the camera goes outside, we experience a sense of freedom. This effect is most powerful in the third scene when Johan leaves Marianne. The scene opens with a long-shot of Johan driving to the country house at night, passing a lone dwelling; he comes with the intention of running away to Paris. After a heavy encounter, which is played out within the narrow confines of the small rooms, Johan finally breaks free from Marianne's desperate clinging and the camera follows him outside and watches him drive off in the morning as the wind blows through the trees. Then Bergman intercuts between huge close-ups of Marianne's face, taking over the whole screen as it slowly registers the painful reality of the situation, and long-shots of Johan's car speeding away from the claustrophobic house. The final scene, in which they have both gained considerable freedom, opens with an exterior overhead shot of a city street. A car drives into the frame, parks, Marianne gets out, runs across the street, as wind blows through the trees. Johan drives into the frame, parks, gets out; they kiss behind a tree, then run to his car and drive off to their rendezvous at the same house John previously abandoned. But this time we are more aware of the surroundings—especially the trees and the sea. During the night, we see briefly a moody dark landscape of the isolated cottage in the misty air as a foghorn wails in the distance. This jarring image introduces a different mode of reality (which is familiar in other Bergman films such as *Persona*, *Shame*, and *The Passion of Anna*) and prepares us for the next shot, where Marianne awakens from a terrifying nightmare, in which she has lost her hands and is sinking in soft sand, unable to reach Johan and the children. The ordinary reality has temporarily receded, and Marianne, who is so proud of her ability to cope realistically in the world, is momentarily out of control.

As in earlier films, Bergman relies heavily on the facial close-up to explore the feelings of his characters, but this technique is handled less self-consciously than usual. Characteristically,

a scene starts with a symmetrical medium two-shot. As the conversation becomes more intense and the characters begin to drop their social masks, the camera moves in for a close-up of the individual. The close-ups grow larger as the emotions become more heated. For example, in the scene where Marianne is interviewing the woman who wants a divorce, we first see the two women equally balanced in the frame, then intercut between a close-up of each. As the woman describes her loss of sensation, Marianne's face grows larger, enabling us to recognize the terror in her expression. Throughout the film the camera is usually static. When it does move, it has tremendous impact, particularly in the violent struggle between Marianne and John. Similarly, the characters are also frequently static; when they do move, their gestures frequently help to express their feelings. Marianne paces in anger when she describes what she endured in their marriage and paces in fear when she tells Johan her dream. Although the film's style is highly controlled, it is almost invisible; it does not call attention to itself. The only sign of artificiality is the division into six scenes, which is carried over from the original television format (six 50-minute segments, which have been cut down for theatrical distribution to two hours and 48 minutes); yet these divisions function like chapter headings in a psychological novel.

Scenes from a Marriage belongs to a new genre of expanded psychological realism—the four- or five-hour film exploring complex modern relationships, focusing on intense encounters between two or three people, and achieving a depth of characterization previously thought possible only in the novel. This genre also includes Jacques Rivette's *L'Amour Fou* (*Mad Love*), which presents a marriage between a theatrical director who is working on a production of a classical play and his actress wife who quits his play and retreats into madness, temporarily drawing him into her schizophrenic world of playful destruction. Another example is Jean Eustache's *The Mother and the Whore*, which examines a complex triangle involving a

childish, charming, exploitive young man who is gripped by the fear of death; the economically independent woman he lives with in a modern relationship of limited commitment; and the dependent, alcoholic, promiscuous nurse he takes up with, who longs to have his baby and whom he ultimately agrees to marry. The four-hour length of these two films may be essential to achieve the unusual depth of characterization and to reveal the many contradictory sides of these unconventional relationships, but it has seriously limited their commercial distribution. The long version of *Scenes from a Marriage* probably would have done better because of Bergman's stature, but he didn't take the chance and decided to cut it for the theaters. Although more conventional in length, some films by John Cassavetes (particularly *Faces* and *Husbands*) share the same focus and are related to this genre. Like Bergman, Cassavetes relies on the intense psychological encounter between two individuals as a recurring structural element that works against the more conventional narrative line and that highlights the acting rather than the visuals or editing rhythm. Like both Bergman and Eustache, Cassavetes is a writer-director who is able to draw upon his own emotional experience, using some of his intimate friends both as models for his characters in the writing stage and as actors in the final production. This intimate rapport enables all three film-makers to tap the inner resources of their actors, allowing them a great deal of freedom in the roles while still exercising considerable control over their performance. The result in all three cases is an extraordinary emotional authenticity. When watching a Cassavetes movie, we are aware that Gina Rowlands is his wife, and Peter Falk and Ben Gazzarra his buddies. When we see *Scenes from a Marriage*, we can't forget that Liv Ullmann and Bergman used to be lovers. Undoubtedly, in making the film, they both drew heavily from this shared experience.

In some ways, *Scenes from a Marriage*, and indeed the entire genre of expanded psychological realism, is related to the soap opera. The basic materials and subject matter are the same,

though they are handled very differently. The connection was very apparent in *The Lie*, a teleplay written by Bergman, but directed and produced by others in the United States, Canada, and England. Despite the fact that the American production used very talented actors (the husband and wife were played by George Segal and Shirley Knight), the performances lacked the authenticity we are accustomed to seeing in Bergman movies. The timing was off and the visuals mundane. As a result, *The Lie* looked more like conventional soap opera than a Bergman film. In *Scenes from a Marriage* Bergman retains this same subject matter and adopts the soap opera's serial structure, yet without losing his usual depth and power. He transforms the sentimental popular form and proves it is capable of becoming high art. Thus, the growth of his characters and their relationship is analogous to the growth of the genre or form in which they are presented.

Soap opera appeals predominantly to a female audience, particularly frustrated housewives. A couple of years ago at a meeting of the Modern Language Association, Leslie Fiedler argued that the soap opera was a revolutionary form in disguise, for it enabled oppressed females to watch women triumphing over men. Like the sentimental novel, it presents a world in which the capacity to feel is at the top of the moral hierarchy, and our culture has traditionally assigned this virtue to women. The soap opera's appeal to women might also rely partially on its structure. Open-ended, slow paced, and multi-climaxed, it is in tune with patterns of female sexuality, particularly when contrasted to the "well-made" play, with its emphasis on a single climax, and to the fast-paced picaresque adventure story. The psychological and sentimental novel, which also appeal strongly to a female audience, grew out of Samuel Richardson's eighteenth-century epistolary novels, *Pamela* and *Clarissa*, which focus on heroines whose exceptional virtue and strength of personality enable them to break social convention. In these works, the action is presented in a series of long, highly detailed, slow-paced letters which also

have multiple climaxes. The reader is concerned less with discovering what actually happens than in learning how the heroine feels about it from moment to moment, and these fluid feelings can only be captured in the personal letter, which is the prime vehicle for honest and sincere expression.

In *Scenes from a Marriage*, as in the soap opera and the sentimental novel, the woman expands her power. In the opening interview, when Johan is asked to describe himself in a few words, he rambles on confidently:

It might sound conceited if I described myself as extremely intelligent, successful, youthful, well-balanced, and sexy. A man with a world conscience, cultivated, well-read, popular, and a good mixer. Let me see what else can I think of . . . friendly. Friendly in a nice way even to people who are worse off. I like sports. I'm a good family man. A good son. I have no debts and I pay my taxes. I respect our government, whatever it does, and I love our royal family. I've left the state church. Is this enough or do you want more details? I'm a splendid lover. Aren't I, Marianne?

Besides the list of glowing adjectives, we learn that his self-image is largely based on social roles and attitudes and that he requires validation from Marianne only in the area of sex. Huddling beside her husband on the couch, making herself look as small as possible, Marianne is asked the same question and replies: "Hmm, what can I say . . . I'm married to Johan and have two daughters." The rest of the film is spent revising these answers. In scene four, when Johan visits Marianne a year after their separation, they sit on the same couch and she tries to answer the same question by reading from a journal which her therapist has encouraged her to keep. She reveals an awareness that she has played the role of the passive female dictated by the culture, that she has learned to dissemble and to deny her own sexuality, that she has no idea who she is or what she is capable of. As we listen to this moving speech, we see a series of still photographs of Liv Ullmann. A blonde child is singled out from a class picture. We see her again naked, then mischievous as she

holds a cat by the tail. We watch this spirit disappear in awkward adolescence, and observe the young woman arranged in a series of stilted poses, trained to act out a variety of roles, culminating in the bridal portrait. We try to figure out what, if anything, these frozen images can tell us about Marianne's inner self. Perhaps we remember her desperate examination of Paula's photograph when she was trying to accept the reality of the other woman's existence but could comment only on her "lovely breasts" and "dyed hair." Marianne is eager to hear Johan's response to these first signs of honest self-exploration, but he has fallen asleep. As her consciousness begins to awaken, his slips into unconsciousness. Later, after they have made love and he is about to leave, she reads him a letter from Paula, which redefines Johan as an insecure man full of self-doubt. In the next scene in Johan's office, the situation is reversed. This time Marianne is the seductive visitor who yawns as Johan delivers an identity speech; he is the one who offers the brandy and wants to return to the safety of their marriage. Yet his clinging is a lot more violent than Marianne's has been. In the final scene, Johan comments directly on the reversal: "We've discovered ourselves. . . . One perceives his smallness. The other her greatness." And then as he invites her to bed, he jokingly asks, "Can you possibly, I say *possibly*, ration your boundless female strength?" The development of Marianne's sexuality is reinforced by Bergman's choice of the soap opera structure. The original five-hour version, which focuses on six scenes from a period of ten years, already presumes time gaps and the omission of other significant encounters. That is one reason why the cutting of two hours does not really ruin the movie. Of course, I would love to see the whole five hours and hope that at some time this will be possible; but even that version is partial. In the theatrical version, Bergman creates a two-part structure, each part comprised of three scenes. In contrast to the original, he omits all characters other than Johan and Marianne from the last three scenes. This narrowing of focus and the balanced two-part

structure may intensify the claustrophobic nature of the couple's relationship, yet part two presents a reversal of many scenes from part one and thereby becomes a vehicle for expressing growth. Unlike the conventional soap-opera structure, the movement is not merely linear.

The primary distinction between *Scenes from a Marriage* and soap opera is the way it affects us emotionally. The film's impact is tremendous. Instead of leading us to forget about our own lives and to get caught up vicariously in the intrigues of others, it throws us back on ourselves and our own experience. The violent quarrel between Peter and Katarina and the panic felt by the woman seeking the divorce should have been signals for Marianne and Johan to examine their own relationships; we are invited to use their experience in the same way. In this film we do not escape into the conventional fantasies offered by soap opera, but courageously explore where a relationship is capable of going. We watch Johan and Marianne experience a kind of growth that has never before been captured on film. The portrayal of their marriage is so complex, so subtle, so varied and multi-dimensional that it is bound to trigger personal associations for anyone who has been involved in a long-term relationship. It makes us think about our own ex-husbands, ex-wives, and ex-lovers, wondering if those relationships would have followed a similar course if only we had had a similar capacity for growth and the courage and energy to persist. It makes us consider where those relationships stopped, at what stage and for what reasons, and to try to see where we are now in our own process of growth. The film implies that if we have the strength to take a relationship as far as it will go, to discard as many false masks as possible, to live through the outbursts of hatred and violence, to confront honestly our full range of feelings, we may discover an emotional capacity that is much deeper and richer than we expect. The doubts are never quieted, the struggle is never over, the confusion is never eliminated, but the imperfect love comforts and survives. —MARSHA KINDER

LUCIA

Director: Humberto Solas. Screenplay: Solas, Julio García Espinosa and Nelson Rodríguez. Photography: Jorge Herrera. Tricontinental.

Of the more than 50 feature films which have been produced in Cuba since the revolutionary government set up the ICAIC (Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industria Cinematográficas) *Lucía* is only the second to be distributed in the United States.¹ Since its release in 1968,² *Lucía* has won several international awards, including the Society of Italian Producers' "Golden Globe" award, the International Film Critics' Prize, and the grand prize at the Moscow Film Festival.

Lucía is composed of three separate films about women named Lucía. Each lives in a distinct period of Cuban history, indicated by the dates which introduce the three parts of the film—1895, 1933, 196—. These years correspond respectively to the war of Cuban independence from Spain, the end of the dictatorship of Gerardo Machado, and the period of the post-revolutionary literacy campaign undertaken in 1961.

Solas uses different sets of actors and distinct cinematic styles for the three historical epochs. Moreover, each Lucía belongs to a different social class—landed creole aristocracy, the upper middle class of the depression years, and what would have been the rural peasant class before the Cuban revolutionary government came to power in the late fifties. Each Lucía thus lives in a period of great political and social change which inevitably and profoundly affects her private life. A love story serves as the basic plot outline for the unfolding of the three parts, and each Lucía's circumstances and choices are related to a love affair and/or marriage with one man.

According to director Solas, in an interview in the Cuban magazine *Bohemia*, the links between the three stories are:

... a woman's presence, a woman's attitude during a specific period of history, and her relationship with a man. On the other hand, what is most interesting for me is that, throughout the film, there's a theme of a particular society, though this has several levels to it. The most important level, it seems to me, concerns a certain decolonization process, which I try to reflect.